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SUBJECT: REACTION TO SADDAM DECISION FALLS ALONG SECTARIAN LINES

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (C) Summary: Initial Iraqi reaction to the Saddam verdict and sentence has fallen along predictable sectarian lines, with Shiites and Kurds pleased, even celebratory, and Sunnis either silent or critical of the trial and the sentence. Shiite celebrations have so far been exuberant but peaceful. It is too soon to say whether this event will have a significant impact on sectarian feelings. End Summary.

Shiites Pleased, Celebratory

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**¶2.** (C) Shiites are vocally pleased, even celebratory, about the verdict and sentence. PM Maliki addressed the nation on television. Calling Saddam "the worst ruler in Iraq's history," Maliki said the ruling demonstrated the rule of law and judicial objectivity. Maliki depicted the death sentence as insignificant compared to Saddam's killings of Shiites (Maliki listed a number of Shiite "martyrs"), Kurds, Turkomen and Assyrians. The PM notably omitted from his list Sunnis who suffered under Saddam, later adding that Saddam could not be categorized as from any one group because he massacred many people. The PM declared that the GOI is "building a new Iraq" that would never practice discrimination and is not against those without blood on their hands.

**¶3.** (C) Shiite SCIRI leader Adulaziz al-Hakim issued a statement celebrating the "long-awaited day" when the "criminal tyrant Saddam" was sentenced for "three decades of crimes and destruction...in a public court with the world watching." Al-Hakim sounded one of the few almost-conciliatory notes of any Iraqi leader, calling for Iraqis to pull together and for "regional forces" and media outlets to refrain from sowing discord among Iraqis.

**¶4.** (C) Independent Shia Deputy Council of Representatives (CoR) Speaker Khalid al-Attiyah said the public should be happy with this decision against the "tyrannical regime"; Shiite Council of Ministers spokesperson Ali Al-Dabbagh said the defendants deserved the sentences; Shiite CoR member Hasan al-Shammeri (Fadhlila party) called the judgment "right and fair"; independent Shiite CoR member Sami al-Askari called for celebration.

Kurds: "A Great Day"

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**¶5.** (C) Kurdish leaders have publicly expressed support for the verdict and sentence, although reaction has been more measured than Shiite reaction. Kurdish Alliance (KAL) CoR bloc leader Faud Ma'sum, called the decision good for all Iraqis; KAL CoR Deputy Speaker Arif Taifour expressed happiness with the decision and said the day had been a "great day."

**¶6.** (C) Taifour was not troubled by the prospect that Saddam might be executed before the end of his trial arising out of

the 1980s Anfal campaign against Kurds, saying that convicting "Chemical Ali" Majid is more important. However, KAL CoR member Mahmoud Othman, while also pleased with the verdict, said it would be good for Saddam to be alive for the end of Anfal trial.

¶7. (C) As of early evening November 5, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani had not issued a statement, nor had Kurdish GOI President Talabani or FM Zebari, both of whom are outside the country on official travel.

Sunnis Muted, Critical

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¶8. (C) Sunni reaction has ranged from muted to critical of the conduct of the trial and impact of the verdict and sentence on Iraqi society. IIP VP Tariq al-Hasimi declined to attend the sentencing, ostensibly because he is preparing for a November 6 trip to the Gulf States. An IIP statement called the trial a distraction from the shortcomings of the Maliki government and said the current "crimes" of sectarian persecution exceeded Saddam's.

¶9. (C) In a television interview, Sunni Hewar party leader Salih Mutlaq accused the GOI of being extremist and supporting death squads, and warned that the death sentence would lead to violence. Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars leader Harith al-Dari characterized the trial as politically motivated.

¶10. (C) Outspoken Iraqi People's Conference COR member Hussein al-Falluji also said the trial was a politicized affair, the judges were not objective, and the verdict and

BAGHDAD 00004139 002 OF 003

sentence was deliberately timed to coincide with U.S. elections. Al-Falluji added that the verdict represented a condemnation of all Sunni people.

¶11. (C) On the extreme end of Sunni opinion, the day before the verdict, National Dialogue Council CoR member Abdulnasr al-Janabi said that a death sentence for Saddam would rip Iraqi society apart, adding that Saddam should be kept alive to keep the Shia scared.

¶12. (C) Sunni Endowment head Ahmed Abdul Ghafour al-Samarrai gave the most positive response of any high-level Sunni leader, admitting that Saddam "hurt everyone, Sunnis, Shias and Kurds alike."

Baghdad Reacts Along Sectarian Lines

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¶13. (C) The mood was jubilant in Baghdad's heavily-Shiite Sadr City district, featuring public gatherings and ubiquitous placards of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Shiites in Baghdad's Rasheed district expressed satisfaction with the decision, reportedly celebrating publicly despite a curfew. Shiites also marched in celebration in other Shiite districts of Baghdad. Embassy officers heard prolonged celebratory gunfire for over an hour after the verdict, with some projectiles landing inside the Embassy compound.

¶14. (C) Baghdad's Sunni residents were not surprised by the verdict and sentence. Some attributed it to the court's preventing Saddam's lawyers from presenting an adequate defense, but otherwise Baghdad's Sunni residents reacted quietly.

And So Do Other Regions

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¶15. (C) Regional reaction has also fallen along sectarian lines:

-- REO Basrah reported celebrations in the heavily-Shiite southern governorates of Basrah, Muthanna, Maysan and Dhi Qar. In the city of Basrah (Iraq's second largest city), people demonstrated and lit celebratory fires.

-- The city of Najaf, the spiritual center of Shiism, was effectively closed down by peaceful celebrations. People congregated peacefully at the Imam Ali shrine. Najaf governor Asaad al-Taee issued a statement praising the verdict; Najaf residents ignored his admonitions against celebratory fires.

-- In Shiite Karbala, residents celebrated around holy shrines, and imams at the shrines were heard congratulating the congregations over loudspeakers.

-- In Kut, the capital of heavily-Shiite Wasit governorate, residents danced in the streets and lit celebratory fires.

-- Reaction in Babil province, with a Shiite south and Sunni north, was along sectarian lines. Celebratory gunfire was heard in south Babil, while some ex-Ba'athists protested the verdict in north Babil. A north Babil Sunni leader said Sunnis opposed the verdict and called Saddam Iraq's "protector" against occupiers. Both Shiite and Sunni Babil residents alike reportedly expressed fear the verdict would make them targets of sectarian violence.

-- Reaction in the Kurdish city of Erbil has been surprisingly muted. PRT Erbil Provincial Action Officer (PAO) was meeting with local officials when the verdict was announced; officials said they were pleased, but without a sense of celebration. PAO saw no celebrations in Erbil's streets and heard no celebratory gunfire, unlike the reaction to Saddam's arrest.

-- In the mixed city of Kirkuk, a potential ethnic and sectarian flashpoint, Kurdish, Shiite and Turkmen leaders expressed satisfaction and happiness with the verdict to PRT personnel; one Sunni leader called the court biased, the trial political, and claimed Shiites controlled the court.

-- The mixed city of Mosul was shut down for security reasons, so there were no public celebrations, but local staff report enthusiastic Kurdish and Shiites responses to the sentence. Sunnis reaction is split: Ba'athists reject the sentence and cite it as evidence of the GOI's "illegitimacy," while more moderate Sunnis hope the verdict will help reconciliation.

-- In the Salah ad Din governorate capital Tikrit, a Saddam stronghold, there were small demonstrations (30-100 people)

BAGHDAD 00004139 003 OF 003

protesting the decision. In the nearby town of al-Dur, the courthouse was set afire in protest and Iraqi security forces stopped approximately 100 vehicles trying to enter the town.

-- In heavily-Sunni Anbar, a local shiekh's representative said Anbar residents were indifferent to Saddam, but would nevertheless be incensed at the death sentence.

¶16. (C) Comment: So far, reactions by political leaders and their publics are almost unanimously sectarian. Few leaders have reacted along the lines of SCIRI's al-Hakim or the Sunni Endowment head al-Samarrai with conciliatory messages. Initially, we see no evidence that Shiites or Kurds are reaching out to Sunnis, nor any evidence of widespread Sunni acceptance of the court's decision. It is too early to tell whether the decision will deepen Iraq's sectarian divide. At this early stage, it is still possible for the decision to play a role in Shiite/Sunni reconciliation, if used as a springboard for outreach to Sunnis, such as de-Ba'athification reform. End Comment.

KHALILZAD